

## Review Essay

### The Fates of the West: Globalization, Populism, and the Prospects for Western Liberalism

Why Liberalism Failed. *By Patrick J. Deneen*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. xxii + 225 pp. Bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$30.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-22344-6.

The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World's Most Successful Political Idea. *By Bill Emmott*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2017. 341 pp. Figures, notes, index. Cloth, \$28.00. ISBN: 978-1-61039-780-3.

The Retreat of Western Liberalism. *By Edward Luce*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017. 234 pp. Figure, notes, index. Cloth, \$24.00; paper, \$16.00; e-book, \$24.00. ISBN: cloth 978-0-8021-2739-6; paper, 978-0-8021-2819-5; e-book, 978-0-8021-8886-1.

Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World. *By Samuel Moyn*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018. xii + 281 pp. Figure, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-73756-3.

Reviewed by Daniel J. Sargent

Tumbling barriers once heralded globalization's ascent. The abolition of capital controls propelled the integration of financial markets from the mid-1970s, and the free movement of capital, goods, services, and labor soon became foundational commitments for the European Union. Multilateral trade reforms, orchestrated after 1995 by the new World Trade Organization, lowered barriers to commerce, while telecommunications and transportation technologies slashed the costs of long-distance transactions. In a stunning development, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 showcased the incapacity of even totalitarian regimes to contain the desires of ordinary citizens for freedom, openness, and global engagement. Recalling that halcyon moment, when a bifurcated Cold War subsided and a new era of globalization and openness took tangible form, the journalist Edward Luce invokes Wordsworth: "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive."

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Today barriers are back in vogue, and ordinary citizens are clamoring to raise them. Donald Trump's exhortations to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border are infamous, but elsewhere border walls are being built, not debated. Turkey is constructing a barrier along its border with Syria. Ukraine is fortifying its border with Russia. India is enveloping Bangladesh within a 2,500-mile barrier while raising a similar barrier along its 1,000-mile border with Myanmar. Island nations are raising the drawbridges. British voters opted to exit the European Union in a contentious 2016 referendum, while Australia operates offshore prisons to keep asylum seekers at bay. Even within the European Union—an institutional crucible for late twentieth-century globalization—the barriers are resurfacing. Austria last summer dispatched tanks to the Brenner Pass to block migrants traveling from Italy; Italians reciprocated by voting into government antiestablishment parties that favor abandoning the euro. The torrent of globalization, which pundits once compared to a force of nature, is trickling, or even reversing.

Whether globalization's advance since the Cold War's end is responsible for the populist anger that roils the democratic world has become an urgent, and even epoch-defining, question. Four recent books, drawn from a slew of recent publications on the interlinked crises of globalization and democratic politics in our times, offer divergent perspectives on the dilemmas facing liberal democracies in an age of advanced globalization and populist backlash. Together, new titles from Patrick Deneen, Bill Emmott, Edward Luce, and Samuel Moyn offer distinct analyses and divergent clues about what, if anything, the world's liberal democracies might do to redeem their historical prospects at a moment in history when the Western model looks to be faltering.

Luce, a columnist for the *Financial Times*, argues in his most recent book, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, that the West's malaise results from a vast transformation in the structure of international politics and economics. The defining development of our times, Luce argues, is the "shift in global power" from the West to the East, a development that advanced globalization has propelled—and continues to propel. Since the mid-twentieth century, the world's economic center of gravity has shifted, Luce notes, from the mid-Atlantic to central Asia—and will soon "settle at a point somewhere between China and India" (p. 21).

The re-creation of geopolitics has propelled class divergence within Western societies, Luce argues. Elites have benefited. Cosmopolitan cities like London, New York, and Vancouver glitter undimmed as capital and capitalists from surging non-Western economies take roost in the West's toniest neighborhoods and institutions. Yet the efflorescence of globalization's nodal cities is unrepresentative of the malaise that afflicts broader social fabrics. Drawing on Branko Milanovic, Luce

posits that the West's middle classes have become globalization's biggest losers. Beyond the urban archipelago, ordinary Westerners in the countryside, suburbs, and provinces are experiencing a sensation of slippage and loss. Aggrieved at the global economic competition, resentful of immigration and cultural diversity, and impressed by nostalgic appeals to bygone greatness, such citizens are rushing to rebuild barriers that globalization has eroded.

The ballots of 2016 were not an aberrant shock, it follows, but the culmination of serial policy errors. Particular fault redounds to the pro-globalization centrism that Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and others pioneered in the 1990s as the "Third Way." Instead of nurturing social adaptation, the pro-globalization Third Way encouraged the inflows of goods, capital, and migrants that have hollowed the West's social cores, while elevating an elitist style of technocratic antipolitics. Urgent social and distributive dilemmas long went unaddressed. Dissatisfied by the failures of the centrist establishment, voters are today hurtling toward the political extremes. The rise of an awesome geopolitical challenge in the form of a resurgent China only aggravates the West's plight. Luce's assessment of the prospects today is somber. "Western liberal democracy is not dead yet," he writes, "but it is far closer to collapse than we may wish to believe" (p. 184).

The political theorist Patrick Deneen is similarly bleak, but his explanation in *Why Liberalism Failed* is of a different order. What ails the contemporary West, Deneen argues, is not the ebbing of the West's historical ascendancy so much as the transcendent defects of liberalism itself. As an ideological creed, liberalism made two vital assertions: first, that the individual is the primordial, inalienable bearer of political rights; and second, that the pursuit of self-interest on a massive scale yields economic prosperity and political stability, as Adam Smith and James Madison would argue. In its bid to emancipate individuals from constraints of all kinds, Deneen argues, liberalism set aside older political traditions, both classical and Christian, that cherished the cultivation of virtue and individual restraint as a basis for civilized life. Abandoning Aristotle, Deneen posits, we moderns reconstituted politics as a festival of selfishness.

Deneen's argument is sweeping and might appear crude but for his insistence that premodern forms of political sociability survived deep into the liberal era. Echoing Alexis de Tocqueville, he argues that the associational legacies of a premodern world—the solidarities borne of culture, religion, and history—long tempered liberalism's most radical impulses. Yet liberalism's advance has, over two centuries, eroded the "pre-liberal inheritance," progressively recentering politics on the liberal conceit of the rights-bearing individual (p. 29). Liberalism's

ascent has wrought ironic results. To vindicate individual rights, including against the constraints that preliberal forms of sociability and ethics require, liberalism has warranted *both* the emancipation of markets *and* the consolidation of powerful, oppressive apparatuses of government power to police and vindicate liberal freedoms. The state of nature might be an anthropological fiction, but we are hurtling, Deneen warns, toward the realization of Thomas Hobbes's bleak vision of a political landscape devoid of associational life apart from the umbilical association between the rights-bearing individual and the Leviathan state. This outcome, he insists, results from the devotion of both the center-left and the center-right toward essentially liberal solutions.

Deneen's diagnosis of a systemic, inevitable crisis of liberalism offers a novel perspective on the populist insurgencies of the present. Liberal elites have strived to expand liberalism "beyond the nation state," he argues, espousing "economic integration and the effective erasure of borders" (p. 157). The ensuing rise of a transnational "cognitive elite" oriented toward acquisition and habituated to "deracinated vagabondage" is fulfilling liberalism's vision of a "new aristocracy" of natural talent (p. 132, 149, 150). Back in flyover country, liberalism's left-behinds have been "degraded" and left with "breadcrumbs" (p. 148, 155). The sociological observation is familiar, but what is novel here is Deneen's insistence that yawning inequality in our times results not from the disruption of advanced globalization or the entrenchment of special interests so much as from liberalism's fullest realization, or apotheosis. Looking ahead, Deneen perceives two great perils. Either the degraded masses will revolt against liberalism, perhaps embracing populist demagoguery, or liberal elites will deploy ever-more-elaborate instruments of surveillance and control to sustain a liberal order against popular resistance. Transcending these bleak alternatives, Deneen argues, may depend upon our willingness to abandon liberalism's integrative, globalizing logic and instead rebuild small-scale participatory democracies—to resurrect political as well as economic barriers, that is.

Their analyses point in quite different directions, but there are echoes of Deneen's analysis in the outlook of Samuel Moyn, the intellectual historian who has become a prominent critic of human rights ideology. Crucially, neither writer accepts liberalism as a plausible basis for the reconstitution of social, economic, and political order. In his brilliant new book, *Not Enough*, Moyn strives to recover an alternative, and more egalitarian, political tradition that might be mobilized to counter the radical inequality of our present, rights-fixated political order. Proceeding as an intellectual historian, not as a diagnostician of contemporary affairs, Moyn also returns to the Enlightenment. Unlike Deneen, he fixates on the brief phase of Jacobin ascendancy in Revolutionary

France, turning for inspiration to thinkers like François-Noël Babeuf, whom Moyn credits with introducing the idea of “fair distribution” to the lexicon of politics.

As he moves forward, Moyn develops both a defense of economic egalitarianism and an explanation for its historical abeyance. Moyn focuses much of his critique on a parallel tradition of “sufficient provision,” which has, he argues, stymied the ripe potential of economic egalitarianism (p. 14). From Otto von Bismarck’s social insurance schemes to Robert McNamara’s World Bank, Moyn suggests, the defenders of established hierarchies have conceded to provide social minimums, even social rights, to the very poorest as a kind of prophylactic against political tumult. The egalitarian tradition has, in contrast, seldom held sway, except during the post-1945 phase of welfare-state construction in western Europe. Postwar welfarism, Moyn argues, represents history’s most comprehensive effort to realize an egalitarian political economy. Yet Moyn is too good a historian to hail the postwar “ideology of national welfare” as an uncomplicated exemplar of moral progress (p. 39). The truest pioneers of Europe’s welfare-state tradition, he acknowledges, were the fascist states that pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s a new order of nationalist political economy as the Great Depression dethroned liberal solutions.

The point focuses our attention, once again, on the borders. The pursuit of equality within nation-states, Moyn concedes, has in practice depended upon erecting categories of harsh exclusion. Yet the more interesting question, for Moyn, is how egalitarianism might be redeemed from its long historical embroilment with the politics of exclusion and racism. To this end, Moyn revisits a series of initiatives that political thinkers and actors concocted after 1945 to realize distributive justice at the global scale. For the first generation after decolonization, he notes, postcolonial elites strived to emulate the achievements of European welfare states through the pursuit of national economic development. The quest for equality took a more interesting turn in the mid-1970s, when a global crisis of capitalism enabled the world’s developing countries to demand a “New International Economic Order” (NIEO) to guarantee incomes and support economic development in the postcolonial world. The NIEO was an “imaginative” effort to advance the cause of distributive justice among developed and developing societies (p. 113). Though it failed, the NIEO still represents, in Moyn’s assessment, the outstanding attempt to formulate a welfare compact capable of producing a modicum of distributive equality at the global scale.

Since the late 1970s, the NIEO’s egalitarian promise has faded. The dual ascent of globalization and neoliberalism has widened inequalities within, if not always between, societies. Global meliorists, acting in the

tradition of sufficient minimalism, have strived to mitigate the worst symptoms of global inequality through the provision of “sufficient” minimums to the world’s most desperate people. Yet, Moyn charges, approaches to poverty alleviation based upon the logic of sufficiency have failed to engage the entrenchment of severe inequality in our global political economy. Grappling with the realities of widening inequality in our times requires, Moyn argues, that we set aside our preoccupation with the satisfaction of individual rights—a preoccupation that is also manifest in our fixation on the promotion of human rights—and turn instead to the collective, or social, scale of analysis. Projecting Babeuf’s example upon a planetary canvas, Moyn posits that achieving global justice requires us to engage the realities of widening inequality not as a problem for the poor but as a common, and shared, imperative.

Set against the searing critiques that Luce, Deneen, and Moyn levy, Bill Emmott, a former editor of the *Economist*, is almost cheery about the prospects for the West and its open economies. Cheeriness is a relative quality, but the crucial difference is the capacity of Emmott’s analysis to countenance some kind of redemption. Like the other writers reviewed here, Emmott does not dispute that the West is in crisis, but he blames neither globalization nor the inherent defects of liberal solutions. Emmott instead argues that the “ability of powerful special interests” to capture “laws, regulation, and public resources” has sapped the West’s economic dynamism and imperiled the legitimacy of its political systems (p. 28). In his assessment, the rise of “popular anger” directed toward entrenched elites indicates not a resentment of unequal economic outcomes as such but a deeper rage against inequalities of opportunity (p. 49). Special privileges in the West today abound, Emmott argues, not only for the fat cats sitting atop the financial services industries but also, in many Western countries, for senior salaried employees who enjoy perks and protections denied to younger, temporary workers. Generational inequalities, he suggests, are as severe as any of the other categories of inequality that vex the contemporary West.

While he laments the West’s plight, Emmott has not lost faith in its model. “The combination of openness and of equality of civic or political rights” pioneered in the West, Emmott writes, “will always bring prosperity and social progress to whichever nations take it up and stick with it” (p. 207). Such optimism, somewhat ironically, permits Emmott to postulate nostalgic solutions to the West’s crisis. What the West needs, he argues, is vigorous recommitment to openness: a “neo-neoliberalism,” as he puts it that will sweep away the accretions of vested power and influence and restore equality of opportunity (p. 211). This will not be easy. Although he invokes Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as salutary models, Emmott acknowledges that

their market-oriented reforms produced “concentrations of wealth and power that have proved capable of subverting democracy” (p. 210). Rebuilding a vital future for the West will require “a new thinking about how openness and equality can be made to live together” (p. 211). While he remains a proponent of globalization, Emmott concedes that achieving a reconciliation between openness and equality may require open societies to rethink the utility of borders—and to countenance anew the imposition of controls upon the movement of both migrants and money across national frontiers.

Varied as their assessments are, Deneen, Emmott, Luce, and Moyn concur that the Western model is in trouble; the debate is about whether renovation, reconstruction, or replacement is in order. Yet at some level, their diagnoses of crisis remain perplexing. After all, human life has, by many measures, never been better than it is in the world’s most advanced societies today. Public health outcomes across the West escape all historical precedents; technological innovations and labor-saving machinery are emancipating human beings from mechanical and mental drudgery alike; smartphones have located a veritable Library of Alexandria in every pocket; and poverty of diet is increasingly measured in terms of caloric surfeits, not deficits. Even macroeconomic indicators are ticking upward. Unemployment today is low, especially in those industrialized societies that hew the closest to a classical liberal model, and economic growth across the industrialized countries has proceeded, more or less uninterrupted, since the financial crisis of 2008–2009.

Yet crude material indicators miss the point, as all four authors reviewed here agree. What ails the West is not a downturn in production and consumption but something more akin to a crisis of legitimacy. This crisis has to do, in large part, with the political effects of advanced globalization. Across the West, the forward march of globalization has tended, over time, to curtail the nation-state’s coherence and competence as an arena for collective decision making. Representative democracy is, after all, ill-calibrated to produce the kinds of long-range policymaking conducive to success in a globalizing world economy. Globalization demands probity, but voters prefer to cut taxes, raise spending, and defer the costs of fiscal adjustment.

Even worse, from the standpoint of political legitimacy, the loosening of borders has corroded the nation-state’s coherence as a community of fate. Liberal states once strived, with more and less success, to hold in equilibrium two distinct modalities of social power: economic power and political power. Formal or constitutional rights guarantees protected the property holders against majoritarian seizure, while representative and even democratic institutions constrained the domination of politics and society by the most affluent. This delicate compromise achieved

its historical apex in the twentieth century's third quarter, just as the dusk began to fall on the West's centuries-old global ascendancy. The resurgence of globalization since the 1970s has destabilized the equilibrium, empowering property holders (or economic power) over democratic process (or political power). The populist anger that stirs across the West reveals the model's faltering, but remedies may require solutions more profound, and more structural, than the adoption of ameliorative policies. Transnational governance would be a theoretical solution, but the practical implausibility of reconstituting mechanisms for collective decision making at the transnational scale makes the reentrenchment of borders likelier. Yet we should not expect an easy restoration of the mid-twentieth-century social democratic model. The degradation of norms and institutions has exposed the West's politics to the corrupting influence of concentrated wealth, nurturing the elites against whom the populists rage. Russia and China are the West's leading geopolitical rivals, but with their sham institutions, demagogic politics, and intermingled political and economic elites these two great rivals may also represent the West's future.

Avoiding this dismal prospect mandates expansive thinking. In varied ways, the four writers and thinkers reviewed in this essay offer suggestive perspectives on the challenges for a faltering West and its citizens. Here, as elsewhere, the historian Moyn reminds us that the exaltation of the sovereign, rights-bearing individual is an insufficient basis for democratic politics. To progress, we must engage hard dilemmas—such as severe inequality—as problems not just for *the least of us* but for *the all of us*, for the social collective. Yet our prevailing liberal ideology, as Deneen argues, offers a flawed foundation for enlightened action to resolve and transcend the present of liberal democracy. Setting aside grand ideological schema and reengaging politics as an ongoing exercise in local self-government, Deneen insists, is a vital prerequisite for rebuilding a healthier, and more sustainable, kind of participatory democracy.

Such localism may be appealing, but Westerners should no longer assume that they can determine their own fates. Grappling with the most urgent questions confronting the twenty-first century—including the sustenance of international order amid resurgent geopolitical frictions and the (un)sustainability of oil-fueled industrialization at the planetary scale—will require cooperation, as Luce argues, within the West and between the West and its rivals, especially China. Synthesizing compromise among divergent priorities and interests will be necessary to rebuild an international settlement tolerable for Western societies. More focused on domestic politics, Emmott also points in an incrementalistic direction. Rebuilding the West, he suggests, requires not so much



rethinking first premises as recommitting to basic practices that have in the past proved a sound basis for economic development and widening social inclusion. More radical critics might infer here a Pollyanna-like commitment to the status quo, but Emmott's confidence in the prospects for reform should remind us that earlier failures of the Western model—such as the disruption that arose from the oil and inflation crises of the 1970s—have been transcended.

Unknowable as the West's fate may be, the sensation of crisis has proved fertile for political and economic thinking. Facile presumptions that democracy and open markets must proceed hand-in-hand and that non-Western societies must imbibe and regurgitate a Western script are no longer so tenable today as they were in the 1990s. The teleological narrative of globalization hurtling toward an inevitable and integrative destination—obliterating borders and bounded conceptions of politics in the process—is today broken. Our politics may be suffering, but our political discourse—our willingness to think expansively about our fate and our collective responsibilities for our future—may well have benefited from the West's contemporary crisis of confidence, at least if Deneen, Emmott, Luce, and Moyn are any guide to broader trends.

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